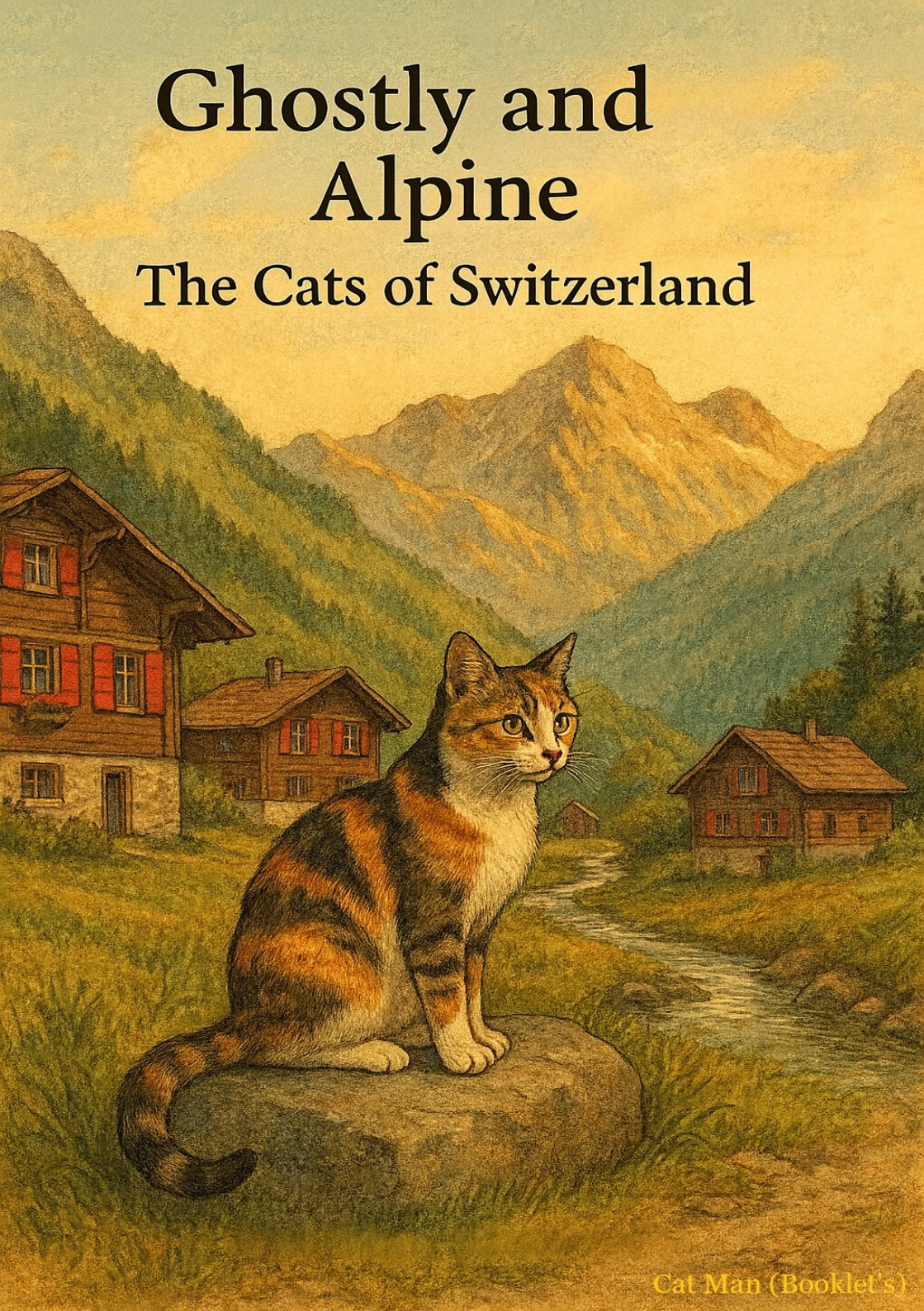
Ghostly and Alpine

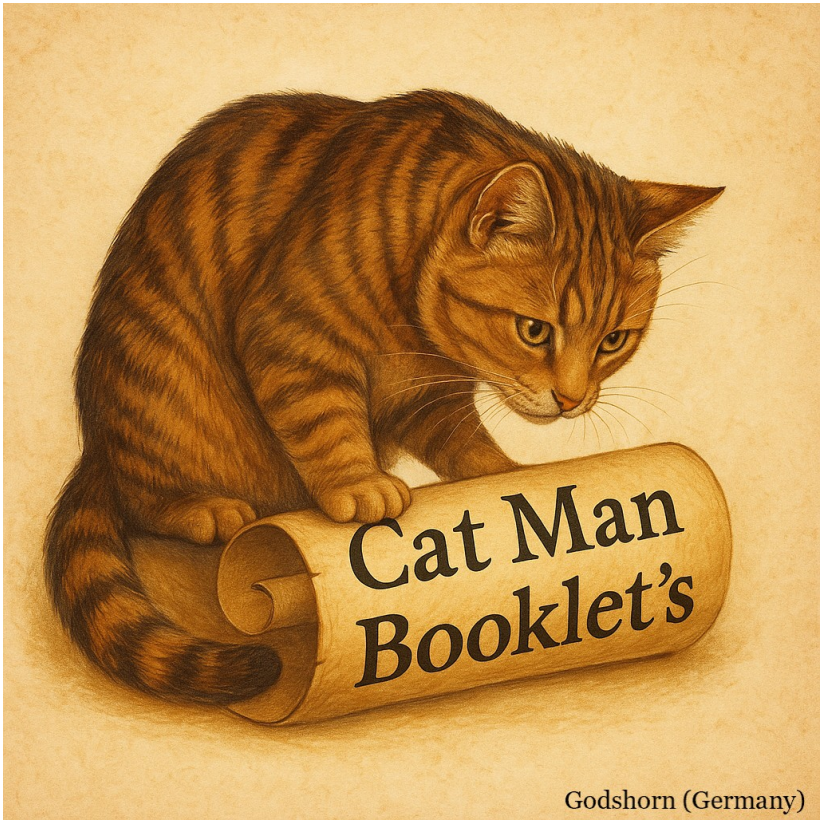
The Cats of Switzerland



Cat Man (Booklet's)

Ghostly and Alpine

The Cats of Switzerland



The Zoo Lion and the House Cat

"Do you see this giant paw?"
said the lion to the cat
who sat in front of his cage
and silently and critically
sizing him up.

"Neither tigers nor hyenas
have such a mane.
Neither Barbary horse nor bull
are as proud and strong as we are!
As agile as us,
no one is as regal and beautiful.
We are us, and even in the zoo
we are always *Le Roi des animaux*!

Remember that, you mouse-eater!
We are bigger and therefore better.
Nowhere is there an animal
that is as powerful as us!"

So he spoke (free of charge)
in the *pluralis majestatis*,
and the kitten, not very big,
but tiny, just nodded.

Rrrr! It purred contentedly,
just to tell him:

"What you are saying, Mr. Lion,
is nothing new to me.

You have overlooked one thing:
You, Mr. King, are trapped,
while I, at least,
free and unbound..."

Moral: A lion behind bars
does not make a cat tremble.

Fridolin Tschudi

Actually, the cat should be Switzerland's heraldic animal. Freedom has always been as important to the Swiss as to the cat.

The coat of arms of Schwyz actually featured a cat for a while, but it soon disappeared again. When cats became native to the northern Alps, they were less a symbol of freedom than a companion animal of the devil, a witch's and demon's animal.

That was in the Middle Ages. Before that, cats had not yet penetrated the Alpine valleys. As C. Keller reports in his "History of Swiss Domestic Animals," there are no finds of cat bones from pre-Roman times. The Romans may have brought cats across the Alpine passes from time to time, but even in the late Middle Ages, cats were still not very common animals.

In the Middle Ages, cats were more legendary than familiar to the inhabitants of the Swiss Confederation. Cats captured the imagination and played an important role in Swiss folklore.

Chapter 2
Myths and Legends about Cats

In earlier times, it seems that there were no ordinary cats in the Swiss Alps—only witches, devils, and other monstrous felines. A legend handed down from Uri, but also from Raetia, tells the following story:

A councilman who had a beautiful wife and an even more beautiful daughter owned a good alpine pasture. But none of his servants wanted to herd cattle there, because every time a servant cooked his rice porridge or soup over the fire, soot mysteriously fell into the pot and spoiled the food. Soon the councilman could no longer find anyone willing to work on the alpine pasture, and he had to let the lush meadows run wild.

After several years, two Valais boys came looking for work. The councilman told them: “I have plenty of work on my mountain farm, but there is a ghost there. It harasses and drives the farmhands away.”
But the Valais boys said: “We are not afraid, we will drive the ghost away!”

So they climbed up to the alpine pasture and settled in. They had brought with them a powerful gag and a consecrated sword on which the Gospel of John was engraved.

On the first evening, nothing happened.
On the second, however—just as one of them was stirring the rice porridge in the copper kettle—a huge pile of soot fell from the floorboards into the dish.

The servant quickly grabbed the pot, ran into the room, showed his companion the ruined porridge, and asked calmly:
“Should we drive out the ghost first and then eat, or vice versa?”
The other replied:
“Let’s chase the ghost away first, then we can eat undisturbed. I’ll go upstairs with the gag and drive the ghost down. You wait here with the sword.”

So he went upstairs and found two cats, one older and one younger. He chased after them and struck at them. The animals raced down the stairs, but the other farmhand was waiting at the bottom and bravely struck them with his sword: he cut off the older cat’s right front paw and the younger cat’s tail.

Then the two cooked rice porridge, ate it in peace, and went to sleep.

In the morning, however, they discovered that the severed paw had turned into a woman’s hand—with a wedding ring—and the tail had become a girl’s braid.

Frightened, they climbed down into the valley, told the master everything, and showed him the eerie remains. The councilman immediately recognized the hand: it belonged to his own wife, who had been sick in bed since the previous evening and always kept her right arm under the covers; and the braid belonged to his daughter, who had been running around without her braid that day.

Now it became clear that the two women were witches. Both had to atone at the stake, and two cats were also burned.

Apparently, seemingly harmless women throughout Central Switzerland could actually be witches who took on the form of cats. What a nasty surprise it was for that young man from Uri who accompanied a pretty girl home from a dance, heart pounding, when she suddenly opened her robe in front of an old house, let it fall, immediately transformed into a cat, nimbly climbed up the wooden wall, and disappeared into the attic. Four witches are said to have lived in that little house.

Things also went badly for the mountain guide who punched a cat sitting on a fence post, saying: “Go away, you damned witch!”
The next day and for weeks afterward, his hand was swollen, and he could no longer climb. Had he been wiser, he would first have offered the cat a piece of bread; in that valley they said, “If a cat eats bread, it is certainly not a witch.”

But witch cats also roamed the lowlands. In Lenzburg in Aargau, a witch cat is said to have tormented a small child every night and thrown it out of its cradle. Only when the parents, on the advice of a ghost hunter, tied five fresh gobies to the child’s chest did the haunting stop. But in the morning, only the bones of the gobies remained.

In Aargau, people would call out to any passing cat:

“Buseli, meow,
Look, there goes an old woman!”

This was meant to distract the cat so that the witch possibly inside it would not get angry.

Where witches are, the devil is never far. A famous witch hunter in the canton of St. Gallen was once visited by the devil himself, who appeared in person to ruin his art of exorcising witches. The miracle doctor called on the Protestant pastor, who said to the devil:
“I come and conjure you!”

But the devil was unimpressed and replied:
“I am coming to devour you!”

The Protestant pastor ran away and brought the Catholic priest. He, too, was helpless at first, but then he remembered a powerful local remedy. He took a bucket and recited the formula:
“Ins Töbeli im Chöbeli!”
(“Into the little ravine, into the little bucket!”)

This forced the devil to transform into a cat and jump into the bucket. The pastor quickly put on the lid and hurried to the ravine to throw the bucket down. But when he reached the edge, he noticed how suspiciously light it had become. He opened it: the cat was gone—and sat instead on a nearby tree, laughing horribly.

Cats also appear in Swiss folklore as terrifying creatures such as the “Schrättlig.” A man from the Rhine Valley was once haunted by such a being: a large cat crept up to his bed at night and leapt onto his chest so that he could neither move nor breathe. Only when he finally managed to shout: “In the name of the devil, get away from me!” did it vanish.

Another man plagued by the Schrättlig defended himself better: after being attacked night after night, he took a hay rake to bed and laid it on his chest, prongs upward.

When the cat jumped as usual, it impaled itself on the rake.

According to tradition, cats that could grow into giant creatures when angered were not so easy to drive away. In the canton of Uri, there are reports of cats as large as St. Bernards, sacks of leaves, or even cows. One man who once threw a stone at such a cat watched in horror as it transformed into a black umbrella rolling down the street —and then vanished. He then felt as if he carried a hundredweight of stones on his back and would have developed a hunch if he had not begun to pray the Gospel of John in time.

From then on, he left every cat alone.

A similar fright befell a man from Zermatt who encountered a black cat on a bridge at night. It blocked his path and glared at him with fiery eyes. He raised his axe, thinking to rid the valley of this threatening creature, but the cat suddenly grew to the size of a tiger and prepared to lunge. His courage failed, and he fled.

In other cases, the cat did not grow but multiplied ominously. A legend from Uri tells of a “night owl” who tried to hit a beautiful black cat with his stick, thinking its thick fur would make a fine chest warmer. But instantly he was surrounded by hissing, growling cats and barely escaped by swinging his stick wildly and running. “After the evening bells ring, you shouldn’t harm a cat!” people still say in Uri.

Another Uri man, out hunting chamois, also admired the fur of a cat and raised his rifle. But as he aimed, he saw a man standing where the cat had been.

When he dropped the rifle in fear, the figure disappeared and the cat crouched again. When he aimed once more, the man returned—and then the cat. The third time, he fired at the human figure, which only laughed and shouted:
"You shot but didn't hit!"
He recognized the voice: it belonged to a man who had died years earlier.

Even stranger is the experience of a chamois hunter who spent the night in a hut on the Sardona Alp. In the middle of the night, he heard dance music, stepped outside, and saw couples dancing by lamplight. A beautiful girl approached him and invited him to dance. Afterward, she slipped a sausage into his coat. In the morning, the sausage had turned into a cat's tail.

A similar witches' dance is said to have occurred in the Prättigau, where a young man was given a shepherd's pipe that miraculously produced perfect dance music—until dawn. When he proudly returned home and reached into his pocket to play again, he found only a cat's tail.

Two councilors from Reuss Valley experienced an even more embarrassing transformation. After being followed and scratched by two cats, they struck at them and cut off their tails. They stuck the tails onto their hats as trophies. But when they arrived home, their wives asked: "What is that on your hat?"
They removed the hats—and instead of cat tails, each man found a red woman's petticoat.

Legends from the Valais tell of cats guarding treasures. At Schwarzsee near Zermatt, one may see on foggy days a cat crouching on a chest full of gold. Near Ernen, a cat guards treasure in the "Freckenloch."

A particularly clever treasure-cat near Gstöpf grabbed a farmer's neckerchief, wrapped all the gold in it, and vanished.

In Mellingen in Aargau, one could—according to legend—obtain wealth using a black cat, a sack, and a ritual at midnight at the church door. If one answered the spirit's question cleverly ("It's a hare!" — "One taler!"), one received a magical "Wechseltaler" that always returned and even brought back other coins it encountered. A man from Mellingen once emptied the entire church offering box this way.

Chapter 3
Superstitions about Cats

When cats finally appeared more frequently in the Alpine regions around 1500, the Swiss had to learn to distinguish between those said to be witches and those only suspected of being so.

Whatever a human cannot explain is often seen as a sign of witchcraft. And cats possess much that cannot be explained. Their eyes, for example—glowing discs in the dark—made a powerful impression on people. They had no idea then that cats' eyes reflect light because a special membrane interrupts light waves. The effect is predictable: when a light shines on them, they gleam like fire.

Cats were also seen as unintelligently wise creatures because, unlike other domestic animals, they do not seem bothered by extreme cold. No one knew yet that the thick fur on their paws and their warm "overcoat" serve as excellent insulation.

Even the way a cat walks seemed suspicious. Today we know that cats are "soft-footed walkers" who do not drop onto their forefeet but stretch one paw forward and only rest their weight on it when the next paw is well placed—an elegant natural design that yields steady, noiseless movement. But formerly, the quiet and stealthy gait of cats led people to think that the animals were bewitched.

The heavy winter coats of Swiss cats were also misinterpreted. With such dense fur, a cat can pick up tiny particles even in strong wind—giving the impression

that it can “catch winds,” as legends say. And because it often seems to vanish suddenly from a path, many believed the cat could turn invisible.

Thus it fit folklore perfectly that cats were believed able to sense the future. In many parts of the Valais, Bernese Oberland, and Graubünden, it was said that if a cat washed itself in front of a door, a funeral would soon follow. In the Fribourg region, there was the belief that if a cat passed between two people walking together, the friendship between them would end.

To frighten a witch cat—especially one with glowing eyes—people in the Toggenburg region would hold a red cloth toward it. This was said to protect the bearer from any witchcraft the cat might cause.

The foreign look of cats, their unpredictable movements, their incredible agility, and their independence—all of these qualities made cats appear mysterious. Nature had endowed them well: exceptional agility, balance, climbing ability, jumping power, and an excellent sense of direction. But in earlier times, people could not explain these traits biologically, so they interpreted them as magic.

Stories told in the Rhone Valley give a vivid example: someone wakes at night, hears a rustling or a soft step, imagines a shadow passing through the room, and suddenly the cat jumps onto the bed. Under such conditions, it was no wonder that people believed that cats entered homes through closed doors or even through walls.

Some people even thought cats could talk. During the First World War, one could read in Swiss newspapers that the German army had trained cats as spies. They were allegedly carried in backpacks to gather information on Allied positions at night and return to the German lines at daybreak. Whether from conviction or mockery, this rumor spread far—though it now seems more like a curious anecdote than a real belief.

Even Alexander the Great was unable to escape cats. According to legend, he once consulted an oracle about a particular fear of his—fear of cats. The oracle told him that someday water would fall from the sky, and on that day he would die. He distrusted rain forever after. But the water that killed him did not come from the sky—it came from a poisoned drink.

It is understandable that people who saw cats as dangerous and uncanny creatures sought ways to defend themselves. Someone from Toggenburg cut off new twigs from a hazel bush while saying the Lord's Prayer—or, depending on the village, the Creed. With the beating of this "holy" hazel rod, one was said to be able to drive away all witches.

In Balzers in Liechtenstein, there was the belief that one could hurt a witch by sticking a red-hot nail into the hole of a key. If a nearby cat meowed, people believed that the spell had reached the witch.

Chapter 4
Cats and Diseases in Folklore

The many diseases attributed to cats were often explained as the work of witches. When a cow fell ill—especially with udder problems—it was usually said that a witch had taken on the form of a cat during the night and drunk the milk. The Swiss believed that a cow could be protected by feeding it hay that had been blessed on Palm Sunday.

In canton Uri, people even believed that a witch cat could cause a pregnant woman to miscarry simply by touching her. The idea that a woman might lose her unborn child due to such a touch spread fear throughout the Alpine valleys.

There was also the belief that a witch could cast an illness on a cow simply by scratching the animal's udder. In many regions, people claimed that this could lead to a bloody discharge. When a cow suffered from udder inflammation, it was therefore not unusual for the owner to suspect a witch.

Clever measures were developed in an attempt to detect these witches. In several villages, it was said that if one suspected a cat of being a witch, one could toss the cat into cold water. Should she float, she was considered bewitched; if she sank, she was thought to be innocent. Fortunately, this test was rarely applied, as many people valued their farm cats too much to risk drowning them.

Cats were also accused of stealing human breath during sleep. Even though this belief existed in many countries, it was particularly feared in the Alpine region.

If a child died suddenly, some villagers were quick to point the finger at the cat.

Not only were witch cats feared, but also harmless cats that brushed past someone at night. In some Swiss valleys, people said that touching a cat in the dark could cause illness unless one immediately recited a protective verse.

Frighteningly, some even believed that cats could transmit diseases by sitting on a sick person's chest or face. They thought the cat absorbed the illness and then transferred it to someone else. This belief led to many misunderstandings and fueled the fear of cats as dangerous creatures.

When epidemics struck the Swiss Confederation—such as plague or cholera—cats were often blamed as carriers of disease. In response, people frequently drove them away, not realizing that cats, by hunting mice and rats, could actually help reduce the spread of such illnesses.

It is understandable that people sought explanations for suffering and disease. Lacking scientific knowledge, they turned to the supernatural, and the mysterious nature of cats made them easy targets. Thus arose the belief that cats were mediators of illness, capable of causing or curing disease depending on the circumstance.

Chapter 5
Cats and Weather Signs

Cats have always played a role in predicting the weather. Their behavior, which often changes before a shift in wind or temperature, made them natural barometers in the eyes of the Swiss.

If a cat washed its face thoroughly, it was said that rain was coming. When it sat with its back to the stove, people expected snow or severe cold. If a cat sharpened its claws on wood, it was believed to announce a storm or harsh winds. Even today, many mountain farmers say that a cat's restlessness is a sign of an approaching weather change.

In the Bernese Oberland, people noted that when a cat lay on its back and played with its paws in the air, one could expect fine weather. But if a cat rubbed its head against the doorframe, rain was supposedly imminent.

People also believed that cats could sense avalanches. When a cat suddenly became agitated and ran restlessly in and out of a house during heavy snowfall, many took it as a warning sign that one should not travel out into the mountains.

In some alpine valleys, people even claimed that cats could predict föhn storms. A cat that meowed loudly, paced in circles, or sought unusual hiding places was thought to announce the arrival of the warm, powerful southern wind.

Cats were also considered reliable indicators of cold winters. If a cat's fur thickened particularly early, or if it curled up especially tightly to sleep, people assumed that severe cold would soon follow.

Even fishermen believed in the cat's connection to the weather. When a cat stared out of the window for a long time or repeatedly scratched at the door, sailors on Lake Geneva interpreted this as a sign of rough water or sudden gusts of wind.

Without the scientific knowledge we have today, these observations must have seemed entirely convincing. Cats reacted to air pressure, humidity, and temperature changes long before humans noticed anything. Their instinctive behavior became part of traditional weather lore—and many of these sayings are still known today.

Chapter 6
Cats in Household Beliefs and Customs

In Swiss households, cats were often surrounded by a mixture of affection, superstition, and caution. Many customs reveal how people tried to interpret the cat's behavior or protect themselves from supposed magical influences.

A well-known belief was that a cat should never be allowed to sleep in a cradle. If a cat climbed into a baby's bed, people feared it would "steal the child's breath" or cause illness. Some mothers would place protective herbs near the cradle to prevent a cat from approaching—especially in the rural cantons.

In parts of the Valais, people believed that a cat could foresee a visitor's arrival. If a cat sat at the door and meowed persistently, it was taken as a sign that someone was coming. If the cat scratched at the furniture, visitors were expected to be unpleasant or bring bad news.

In the canton of Uri, one found the custom of offering a piece of bread to a cat that behaved oddly. If the cat accepted the bread, it was considered harmless; if it refused, people suspected a witch in disguise.

In Appenzell, a cat jumping onto a table was considered a serious omen. Some families believed it predicted conflict in the household. Others interpreted the same action as a sign that the cat had sensed an upcoming quarrel and wanted to warn the family.

One particularly persistent belief was that one should never call a cat by its name during the night. Doing so, it

was said, would attract evil spirits or misfortune. In Graubünden, parents forbade their children from calling for their pets after sundown for exactly this reason.

A curious but widespread custom concerned moving house. In several cantons, people insisted that the cat enter the new home before anyone else. If the cat crossed the threshold first, luck was expected to follow; if it refused, the family feared that the move had been made on an unlucky day.

Cats also influenced marriage customs. In some regions, if a cat sneezed during a visit by a young suitor, people considered it a good sign for a future marriage. If the cat hissed, however, the courtship was thought to be doomed from the start.

The way a cat slept was also closely observed. A cat curled up tightly meant frost. A cat sleeping with its head tucked under its paw was taken as a sign of a peaceful home. A cat that slept with its back turned to the household was said to predict arguments.

Cats were treated with both caution and gratitude. Their ability to catch mice was indispensable, and many families fed their cats better than their dogs. But the fear of witchcraft or misfortune always remained close at hand.

These customs show how deeply the cat was woven into the daily life of the Swiss people—sometimes as a guardian, sometimes as a warning sign, but always as a mysterious and significant presence.

Chapter 7
Cats in Alpine Dangers and Rescues

Cats did not appear solely as threatening beings in Swiss tradition; they also played roles as helpers, rescuers, or mysterious protectors in dangerous Alpine regions. Their agility and uncanny sense for threats made them ideal companions in tales of mountain life.

A famous story from the canton of Glarus tells of a man who survived an avalanche thanks to his cat. As he sat at home one winter evening, his cat suddenly became restless, leapt onto his shoulders, and tugged repeatedly at his clothing. When he tried to push her away, she bit into his sleeve and pulled with unexpected force. Surprised by her persistence, he finally followed her outside—just moments before a massive avalanche buried his house completely. The cat saved his life. Because of this, the people of that valley said for years afterward: "When your cat pulls you to the door, go—don't ask why."

In another tale from Graubünden, a herdsman lost his way in thick fog on the alpine pastures. As night fell and the fog grew dangerously dense, he heard a faint meowing. A cat appeared, walked a few steps, turned back, and meowed again as if urging him to follow. Step by step, the man trailed behind the cat until they reached a shepherd's hut. Exhausted and trembling, he realized that without the cat he would have fallen into a ravine.

Similar stories circulated in the Valais. A widow tending goats in early spring once slipped on ice and broke her leg. Unable to stand, she was helpless on the mountainside.

Her cat, who had followed her, ran back and forth repeatedly between the pasture and a distant chalet. Eventually, two boys noticed the cat's strange behavior and followed her—finding the injured woman in time to rescue her.

A more mysterious legend comes from the region around Lake Lucerne. It tells of a black cat that repeatedly appeared during storms on the Pilatus mountain. Travelers claimed that the cat guided them safely to sheltered places, appearing and disappearing without leaving tracks in the fresh snow. Whether guardian spirit or simply a mountain cat accustomed to storms, the creature became part of local lore.

The cat's reputation for sensing danger also extended to rockfalls. In the Bernese Alps, families said that if a cat suddenly hid under the bed or in a corner, one should avoid cliffs and steep paths for the rest of the day. Many believed that cats could hear the deep rumbling of shifting rock long before humans perceived anything.

Some tales even speak of cats protecting livestock. A shepherd from the Toggenburg recounted that his cat would hiss and arch its back moments before wolves approached the herd. This warning allowed him to gather the goats and drive them to a safe enclosure.

These narratives, blending reality and imagination, reflect a deep cultural truth: the Swiss did not view cats only as witches' animals or omens—they also recognized them as watchful, intelligent creatures whose instincts could save lives. In the harsh, unforgiving Alpine landscape, such qualities were deeply valued.

Chapter 8
The Cat as Companion and Symbol in Switzerland

Despite the many fears and superstitions surrounding cats, the Swiss also saw them as loyal companions, valuable helpers, and meaningful symbols. Over the centuries, the cat took on a distinct role in everyday life and cultural identity.

In rural households, the cat was indispensable. Every mountain farm needed at least one cat to keep the mice and rats away from stored grain. A lazy cat was a misfortune; a good mouser was almost a treasure. In some cantons, it was said: “A house without a cat is like a barn without a roof.” The cat protected food supplies, and with them the livelihood of entire families.

The Swiss also valued the cat’s independence. People admired that cats refused to be forced into obedience. A cat that came when called was considered a sign of peace and harmony in the home. A cat that ignored everyone was respected for its freedom—something deeply rooted in Swiss mentality.

In many villages, certain cats were regarded as house spirits. When they regularly sat near the stove or on the threshold, families believed this brought protection. In some regions of Graubünden, people even thought that a cat lying on the doorstep would prevent evil from entering the home.

The symbolic importance of cats appeared in festivals and customs as well. During certain winter celebrations in the Bernese Oberland, masks were decorated with whiskers modeled after cat faces. Children imitated cats in traditional games, believing this would bring agility and cleverness.

The cat also played a role in stories about the afterlife. In some parts of the Valais, it was said that cats could see the spirits of the dead. If a cat stared fixedly at an empty corner of a room, people whispered: “She sees someone we do not.” Though eerie, this belief also offered comfort—suggesting that cats accompanied the departed on their way.

Among Alpine herdsmen, the cat symbolized endurance. Cats survived storms, deep snow, and harsh winds. Their ability to find their way home from great distances became a metaphor for persistence and loyalty.

Artists and writers in Switzerland also found inspiration in cats. Poets described their quiet dignity, painters captured their poised elegance, and folk songs celebrated their mysterious charm. While Switzerland lacked a famous “cat poet” like Colette in France, local writers often included cats as wise or whimsical characters in their tales.

Even political symbolism was not foreign to cats. In some historical pamphlets, cats represented independence and the refusal to submit to foreign rule. Their nimble escape from traps and their ability to challenge animals larger than themselves made them fitting icons of resilience.

Over time, the Swiss perception of cats balanced itself. The witch's cat and the guardian cat existed side by side in the imagination of the people. Fear mingled with affection, caution with admiration. What endured most strongly, however, was the idea that the cat was never fully tame—always a little wild, a little free, and therefore perfectly suited to the Swiss spirit.

Chapter 9
From Demon Cat to Domestic Pet

For a long time, the Swiss saw the cat as a being that existed between two worlds. It was feared as a witch's helper, admired for its independence, and valued for its usefulness. Only slowly did the cat lose its demonic reputation and become a trusted domestic animal.

The turning point came when people began to better understand the cat's natural behavior. Its ability to see in dim light was no longer considered sorcery but simply a gift of nature. Its secretive movements were seen not as signs of witchcraft but as expressions of agility and caution. And its tendency to disappear and reappear mysteriously became more understandable as villages grew and houses became more accessible for roaming animals.

With the Enlightenment, superstition gradually faded, even in remote Alpine valleys. Pastors preached against the belief that cats were witches in disguise. Physicians and scholars increasingly opposed the idea that cats could cause disease through magic. Although many traditional beliefs survived in folk culture, they lost their fearful edge.

At the same time, the affection for cats grew. Families began to treat them not only as mousers but as companions. Children formed bonds with them, giving them names and caring for them. In many households, cats found warm places near the stove, soft cushions, or favorite spots on windowsills.

Cats also became subjects of humor rather than fear. Stories once told with trembling voices were gradually retold as amusing anecdotes. In the cafés of Zurich and Bern, people laughed about mischievous cats that stole sausages or knocked over milk jugs. What had once been interpreted as malice was now seen as playfulness or cunning.

Urbanization also played a role in changing attitudes. As cities grew, the need for good mousers increased. Cats became essential in bakeries, mills, and warehouses. Their practical value helped transform their reputation. A useful animal was less likely to be accused of bringing misfortune.

By the late 19th century, the Swiss cat had largely shed its demonic past. Pet-keeping became more common, and animal protection movements emerged. Cat owners expressed pride in their animals, and veterinarians began to promote proper care. The idea of a cat as a cherished member of the household slowly took root.

Still, echoes of old beliefs remained. Even today, some people in the Alpine regions say that a cat's sudden restlessness can predict a storm, or that a cat staring into a corner sees something invisible. These remnants of folklore coexist peacefully with the modern view of cats as affectionate and intelligent companions.

Thus, the Swiss cat completed a remarkable journey—from feared demon of mountain legends to beloved domestic pet. And yet, something of the old magic lingers in its eyes, in its silence, and in the way it moves through the world. The Swiss, who deeply value freedom and individuality, have perhaps always found a kindred spirit in the cat.

Chapter 10
Cat Stories and Anecdotes from the Alps

The Alps are rich in cat stories—some humorous, some eerie, some touching, and many passed down through generations. These tales reveal how closely the Swiss observed their cats and how deeply the animals were woven into everyday life.

One such story comes from the Engadine. A farmer noticed that every morning, without fail, his cat sat on a high fence post and stared toward the mountains. Curious, he followed her gaze one day and discovered that an avalanche had broken loose far away. The next day the same thing happened, and again the cat stared in the same direction. The farmer soon realized that the cat always sensed distant avalanches long before the sound reached human ears. From then on, the villagers said: "When the cat looks to the mountains, listen."

Another tale from the Bernese Oberland concerns a baker whose cat had a peculiar habit: every night she stole a single bread roll from the bakery and carried it to a nearby barn. Bewildered, the baker followed her quietly one evening and found an orphaned goat kid. The cat had adopted it and fed it crumbs and bits of dough. The baker, moved by this odd friendship, cared for the goat from then on and let the cat take as many rolls as she wanted.

In Uri, a man once complained that food mysteriously disappeared from his pantry. Suspecting thieves, he set a trap. But instead of a burglar, he found his cat with a whole group of mouse pups.

She had carried off bread and dried fruit to feed the young mice—apparently deciding that even future enemies deserved to live. Amused, the man let her continue for a few days before relocating the mice to a safer place. “Even a Uri cat can be merciful,” the neighbors joked.

Some stories verge on the supernatural. In certain valleys, it was said that cats guided lost souls. A man from the Valais claimed that after his father died, the family cat sat at the foot of the bed and stared toward the door for hours, as if watching someone leave. When they later found footprints in the snow leading away from the house—but none returning—the tale spread that the cat had accompanied the father on his final journey.

Another anecdote tells of a schoolteacher in Appenzell who taught his students to observe animal behavior closely. One winter day, his cat unexpectedly leapt onto the table and loudly meowed until the children followed her outside. Moments later, the chimney collapsed into the classroom. The grateful parents said: “The cat saved the school.”

But not all Alpine cats were heroes. A mischievous tomcat in Graubünden had the habit of jumping onto guests’ hats during village festivals. Instead of scolding him, the villagers created a tradition: whoever lost their hat to the cat had to buy drinks for everyone. The tomcat became a beloved troublemaker, and people joked that he funded half the festivals.

In many mountain regions, cats were also said to bring luck to inns. If a cat chose to sleep on a bench in a tavern, the owner took it as a sign that the season would be profitable. Conversely, if the cat avoided the house, people believed that misfortune or illness would follow.

These anecdotes, whether true or embellished, show that the Swiss have long lived alongside their cats in a relationship shaped by respect, curiosity, and humor. The cat is both a familiar presence and an enigmatic creature —part of daily life, yet always carrying an air of mystery.

Chapter 11
The Modern Swiss Cat

Today, the cat in Switzerland enjoys a position very different from the one it once held. No longer feared as a witch's companion or suspected of dark intentions, it has become one of the country's most cherished household animals. In many ways, the modern Swiss cat reflects the values of contemporary Swiss society: independence, resilience, and a quiet but steady presence.

In both rural and urban areas, cats are beloved companions. On mountain farms, they still keep the granaries free of mice, just as their ancestors did centuries ago. In city apartments, they live comfortable lives, often becoming true family members. Swiss veterinarians encourage proper care, vaccinations, and safe outdoor access, while animal welfare organizations advocate for shelter adoptions and responsible ownership.

The image of the Swiss cat has also changed in literature, art, and media. Children's books often feature cats as clever, friendly heroes. Artists depict them lounging on windowsills with views of lakes and mountains. And in modern folklore, the mysterious and dangerous mountain cats of early centuries have given way to affectionate stories about loyal companions, skilled hunters, and amusing troublemakers.

Yet despite the shift toward domestication, something of the cat's old mystique remains. Swiss people still observe their cats closely, watching for subtle signs of weather changes or unexpected visitors.

Even in scientific times, the idea persists that cats possess instincts beyond human understanding. Many still say that a cat's sudden restlessness foretells a storm or that a cat staring quietly out of the window senses something we do not.

In recent decades, animal welfare laws in Switzerland have strengthened protection for cats. The country's regulations are among the strictest in Europe, ensuring that domestic animals receive appropriate care, nutrition, and medical attention. Many municipalities support trap–neuter–return programs for stray cats, helping reduce suffering and stabilize populations.

Cats have also become symbols of Swiss comfort and lifestyle. Cafés with resident cats attract visitors, and social media is filled with images of Swiss cats exploring alpine meadows or napping in rustic chalets. Tourists often remark that cats seem to belong as naturally to the landscape as the cows, the mountains, or the church bells.

Despite modernization, the bond between the Swiss and their cats remains rooted in centuries of coexistence. The fears and superstitions of earlier times have faded, but the fascination endures. The cat has settled into Swiss life as a companion, a guardian of the home, and a quiet observer of the world.

From demon to domestic pet, from mountain legend to beloved household friend—the journey of the Swiss cat mirrors the cultural evolution of Switzerland itself: cautious, independent, quietly enduring, and always a little mysterious.

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For your notes

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Cat Man (Booklet's)